

Is the Syrian Revolution at its End? Is Third Camp Abstentionism Justified?

An essay on the organs of popular power in the liberated area of Syria, on the character of the different sectors of the Syrian rebels, and on the failure of those leftists who deserted the Syrian Revolution

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Introduction

Without doubt, the Syrian Revolution is in a difficult state. It has suffered a series of defeats; the most serious one took place recently when the genocidal Assad regime and its foreign backers Russia, Iran and Hezbollah succeeded in conquering Aleppo in December 2016. This enabled them to drive out the liberation fighters and tens of thousands of civilians.

As a result of Assad's war of oppression against the Syrian people, half of the Syrian population – about 11 million people – have been displaced from their homes. About 5 million of them are currently living abroad.

In the last few years, various left-wing groups have dropped their support for the ongoing Syrian Revolution – some sooner and others more recently – and became *abstentionists* or *Third Campists*. This means that while they don't support the Assad regime (in contrast to the Stalinists, Castro-Chavistas and various centrists) they prefer to abstain from the popular struggle against the dictatorship instead of supporting it, i.e., they support neither side but constitute a "neutral" third camp. These abstentionists justify their stance by arguing that workers and peasants wouldn't play any active role in the struggle anymore, that the liberation struggle was hijacked by reactionary Islamist forces, or that the rebels have become agents of US imperialism or of other regional powers.¹

¹ Among these socialist organizations are e.g., the comrades of the *Trotskyist Fraction – Fourth International*. In an article published a few months ago, the comrades characterized the Syrian Revolution (as well as the liberation struggle in Yemen) as a "*reactionary civil war*" between "*the despotic regime of Bashar al-Assad*" and "*the so-called 'rebels'*" (Claudia Cinatti: The Geopolitics of the Civil War in Syria, September 14, 2016, <http://www.leftvoice.org/The-Geopolitics-of-the-Civil-War-in-Syria>). A similar position of abstentionism between the two camps has been adopted by the comrades of the Turkish *Revolutionary Workers Party* (DIP) which is part of the *Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International* together with the Greek EEK, the Italian PCL and the Argentinean PO.

Likewise, the right-wing centrist CWI characterizes the Syrian Revolution as "*power struggles for influence taking place between various reactionary forces and regimes.*" (CWI: Theses on Middle East, December 2016, <http://workerssocialistparty.co.za/committee-for-a-workers-international/cwi-international-executive-committee-2016/cwi-international-executive-committee-2016-doc-3/>). This position is shared by the CWI's economist twin, *Lutte Ouvriere*. (see e.g., Syria at war: between the militias, the imperialists and their local stooges, March 18, 2017, <https://rdln.wordpress.com/2017/03/18/syria-at-war-between-the-militias-the-imperialists-and-their-local-stooges/>)

Recently the comrades of the *League for the Fifth International* (L5I) also dropped their support for the Syrian Revolution and stated that "*there is a need to recognise that the Syrian revolution has been defeated.*" They now declare the Arab Revolution as finally defeated and over. Hence it wrote in a recently published resolution: "*Now, even if*

The *Revolutionary Communist International Tendency* (RCIT) considers these arguments erroneous and that they completely distort the reality on the ground. As a result of their confusion, such socialists have failed to support one of the key hot spots of the current revolutionary struggle in the world!

In our opinion, the Arab Revolution in general and the Syrian Revolution in particular constitute a historic test for Marxists. This revolutionary process which began in 2011 was the most advanced regional development of class struggle for a very long time. In no other part of the world did the people rise up in such masses, overthrow a number of dictatorships, and arm themselves so extensively. How can groups come forward to support the cause of socialism, when they fail to orient themselves in the living process of revolutionary popular struggles, and prove themselves incapable of taking a stand on the correct side of the barricades?!

It is certainly no exaggeration to state that, since the process of political revolutions and social counter-revolutions related to the collapse of Stalinism in 1989-91, there has been no revolution which sows so much confusion amongst the ranks of reformism and centrism as the Arab Revolution in general and the Syrian Revolution in particular.

From 1989-91, no revolution has demonstrated so starkly the gulf between reformism and centrism on the one hand and Bolshevism on the other. While, in most other revolutions, the differences between centrism and Bolshevism manifested themselves "only" by the different strategies put forth for actually winning the revolution, the Syrian Revolution has placed most reformists and centrists either on the counter-revolutionary side of the barricades (i.e., supporting Assad/Putin) or has forced them to take an abstentionist position and stand off to the side. In this respect, the Syrian Revolution is highly revealing about the true nature of numerous pseudo-Marxist groups.

The RCIT has elaborated and updated its analysis of the Arab Revolution and the Syrian Revolution in numerous documents and articles. We have also published a number of articles in which we addressed the arguments of various opponents of the Syrian Revolution. ² And in an article published

the brutal civil war in Syria resumes, with Idlib and other remaining liberated areas coming under renewed attacks, we have to recognise that the Syrian revolution, which began six years ago, has suffered a strategic defeat. Indeed, we can apply this judgment to the entire Arab Spring, given the reactionary nature of the civil wars in Libya and Yemen. It was defeated by a range of counterrevolutionary forces; military bonapartists, such as el-Sisi or Assad, monarchist, as in Bahrain, or salafist-jihadists who emerged out of the resistance. The task of revolutionaries in the Middle East and internationally is to face the truth, no matter how bitter, that they now face a counterrevolutionary period, whose duration cannot be known, before there will be a re-emergence of mass struggles." (LSI: Resolution on Syria, 02/03/2017, <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/resolution-syria>)

² See e.g., Yossi Schwartz: Raqqa: Defeat the US Imperialist Offensive! An assessment of the US/SDF/YPG war against Daesh, April 2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/us-offensive-in-raqqa/>; RCIT: Defeat the Imperialist Invasion in Syria – Victory to the Revolution! 13.03.2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/imperialist-invasion-in-syria/>; RCIT: The Revolutionary Struggle against Daesh and the Imperialist Aggression in the Middle East, 28.02.2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/resolution-daesh/>; RCIT: The Syrian Revolution and the Assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Joint Statement of the International Secretariat of the RCIT and Sınıf Savaşı (Section of the RCIT in Turkey), 21.12.2016; RCIT: World Perspectives 2017: The Struggle against the Reactionary Offensive in the Era of Trumpism, Theses on the World Situation, the Perspectives for Class Struggle and the Tasks of Revolutionaries, 18 December 2016, Chapter IV. The Middle East and the State of the Arab Revolution, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/world-perspectives-2017/part-4/>; Michael Pröbsting: The Looming Kerry-Lavrov Agreement – A Great Power Conspiracy against the Syrian Revolution, 06.10.2016, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/syria-kerry-lavrov/>; Joint Statement: Solidarity with Aleppo! Hands off Syria! 4 October 2016, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/joint-statement-aleppo/>; Syria: For an Independent Revolutionary Road! Down with the Bombing and Siege

a few months ago, the author of these lines discussed the state of the Syrian Revolution and the dangers by the increasing collaboration between the imperialist Great Powers directed at its liquidation. The following essay elaborates the current state of the revolutionary process and discusses in particular the nature of the local self-government structures, as well as the contradictory nature of the rebel factions.

For this purpose we will utilize – in addition to various articles and books dealing these issues – a number of facts which come directly from sources in Syria or from Syrian refugees with whom the RCIT is collaborating.³ Furthermore, we will discuss and refute the arguments of those socialists who have deserted the liberation struggle of the Syrian workers and oppressed.

against Aleppo! Stop the Turkish Invasion and Occupation! No to the Imperialist Conspiracy against the Syrian Masses! Joint Statement of the RCIT and Sınıf Savaşı (Turkey), 25.09.2016, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/defend-aleppo/>; Yossi Schwartz: The Revolution in Syria won a Tactical Victory! Down with Assad the Butcher! 21 August 2016, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/aleppo-victory/>; RCIT: World Perspectives 2016: Advancing Counterrevolution and Acceleration of Class Contradictions Mark the Opening of a New Political Phase. Theses on the World Situation, the Perspectives for Class Struggle and the Tasks of Revolutionaries, 23 January 2016, Chapter IV.2. Counterrevolutionary Offensive: The Retreat of the Arab Revolution Continues Despite Heroic Popular Struggles, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/world-perspectives-2016/part6/>; Yossi Schwartz: Why Revolutionary Marxists Oppose Daesh/ISIL, 15.12.2015, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/marxists-vs-daesh/>; The Imperialist Counterrevolution Threatens the Syrian Revolution! Down with the Great Powers' Wars! Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution against the Assad Dictatorship! For a Socialist Federation in the Maghreb and Mashreq! Joint Statement of the Agrupación de Lucha Socialista (ALS) and the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency (RCIT), 07.12.2015, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/imperialist-counterrevolution-syria/>; RCIT: Great Powers Aim to Liquidate the Syrian Revolution! Mobilize for International Solidarity with the Syrian Liberation Struggle against the Assad Dictatorship! Stop the US, Russian and French Air Strikes! No to Daesh/IS-Terrorism! 18.11.2015, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/great-powers-syria/>; RCIT: Revolution against Russian Imperialism! Stop the US, UK and French Air Strikes! Smash the Assad Dictatorship! 9.10.2015, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/defend-syria-against-russia/>; RCIT: Revolution and Counterrevolution in the Arab World: An Acid Test for Revolutionaries, 31 May 2015, <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/theses-arab-revolution/>; RCIT: The Arab Revolution is a central touchstone for socialists! Open Letter to All Revolutionary Organizations and Activists, 4.10.2013, <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/open-letter-on-arab-revolution/>. For many more RCIT documents on the Arab Revolution see on our website: <http://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/>

³ In particular, we wish to thank Dr. Haysam Hamoui from the Austrian Coordination Council for Support of the Syrian Revolution, as well as to our brothers Abdul and Ahmed. Comrade Stefan Haknic also provided useful information for this essay. A convenient English language source on the daily events in the civil war is the following website: <http://syria.liveuamap.com>. We also recommend that of the Australian Marxist academic Michael Karadjis: <https://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/>. Helpful information can also be found on the website *The Eternal Spring* <https://eternispring.wordpress.com/>.

Part I

The Nature of the *Local Coordination Councils* in Syria

One of the most outstanding features of the Syrian Revolution has been the creation of the so-called *Local Coordination Councils* (LCC; they are also called *Local Administration Councils*) in the Syrian areas from which the terrorist Assad forces were expelled. Various documents and books have been published on these LCC's – in Arabic, but also in English.⁴ Therefore, here we will only summarize the nature of these LCC's, adding some information which we have received from Syrian brothers and sisters.

The *Local Coordination Councils* initially emerged as committees of activists who coordinated the protests against the regime in their specific areas. Later, after the beginning of the civil war, these LCC's were transformed into local committees in the liberated towns and villages, and administered the civil life of the people. Naturally, the specific character of these committees varies depending on concrete conditions. But, in general, such LCC's are responsible for providing education, health care, justice, child support, etc.

Such committees existed nearly everywhere including, but not limited to, the occupied Golan, Dar'a, Al-Dumayr, As-Suwaida, Damascus, Darāyā, Al-Ruhaybah, Homs (City), Homs (Province), Bab Al-Siba', Dayr Baa'lbah, Al-bayyadah, Al-khalidiyah, Hama, Idlib, Kafuma, Jebel Al-zawiyah, Saraqeb, Tseel, Baniyas, Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasaka (City), Al-Hasaka (Province), Qamischi, etc.⁵

For a time, underground committees of activists continued to exist even in areas controlled by Assad forces. But over time, the extreme repression of the regime, which killed hundreds of thousands and threw many into prison, annihilated these underground structures.

As can be imagined, the work of the LCCs faces tremendous obstacles. An illustrative example is that of the LCCs in the province Aleppo, for which we have information from Muhamed Fadilah, the chairman of the Administration Council of the province of Aleppo, and from Jamal Jeneed, an engineer responsible for projects within the civil administration of the provincial department of Aleppo. They relate how, during the first years of the revolution and war, the councils' work was financed by the opposition forces and supporters of the revolution among the Syrian diaspora. However, in the last two years, the regional administration of the LCCs has been forced to finance itself via small projects (bakeries, etc.), but even these methods hardly provide the necessary support.

⁴ To name just a few: Asya El-Meehy: Governance from Below. Comparing Local Experiments in Egypt and Syria after the Uprisings, 7 February 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/governance-from-below/>; Jules Alford and Andy Wilson (Editors): Khayana. Daesh, the Left and the Unmaking of the Syrian Revolution, Unkant Publishers, London 2016, Sabr Darwish: Syrians Under Siege: The Role of Local Councils, Arab Reform Initiative, October 2016; Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami: Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War, Pluto Press, London 2016; Daniel Moritz-Rabson: In wartime Syria, local councils and civil institutions fill a gap, July 31, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/civil-society-emerges-syria-war/> ; Joseph Daher: Understanding Syria's Revolution: A Response to Mairead Maguire's Article on Syria, <http://peacenews.org/2016/01/26/33329/>

⁵ For a long period the *Local Coordination Councils* did run their own website in Arabic and English (<http://www.lccsyria.org/>). However it is currently not operating.

During the last six months, the staff of the provincial administration hasn't received any wages. They all continue for work for the revolution without being paid.

The very existence of these councils is proof in itself of the deep, popular nature of the revolution. Naturally, we are not suggesting that these councils can be viewed as something like soviets in the Marxist sense of the word. Instead, they can be classified as rather primitive popular democratic organs.

They are not soviets for several reasons. First, the representative members of the councils are not elected by assemblies of the *entire* working population. Rather, membership tends to be dominated by representatives of various civil and popular organizations which, in practice, gives disproportionate influence to the local intelligentsia (teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers etc.).

Second, unlike soviets, specific representatives on the councils *cannot* be recalled at any time the electing assembly deems this appropriate. However, elections of representatives do take place annually (which is still much more regular than in the Western-type of parliamentary democracy).

Yet an additional dissimilarity between the LCCs and soviets is the sharing of power between them and the militias in the liberated areas. While the *Local Coordination Councils* provide the civil administration, the militias, among which the petty-bourgeois Islamist forces constitute a strong segment, wield executive power. Obviously, this represents a problem, as the militias are less under the direct control of the local population.

There have been numerous attempts to coordinate the collaboration of the *Local Coordination Councils* in the liberated areas. Naturally, past defeats and setbacks have also hampered this task. Nevertheless, there is still ongoing a regional coordination of the work of the LCCs. To take the example of the province of Aleppo once again, here representatives from all LCCs meet to elect a regional coordinating committee. About 350 delegates took part in the last regional meeting and elected a coordinating committee of 41 representatives, which in turn elected a smaller executive body of 12 people.

It is important to bear in mind that – contrary to the doomsayers who claim that the Syrian Revolution is over – these LCCs still exist and are organizing essential services to meet the daily needs of several million people who live in the liberated areas controlled by the Syrian revolutionaries.

As Marxists, we must not see things through rose-colored glasses. As we have already stated, the LCCs are not soviets – neither in structure and composition nor in authority. Furthermore, as we have alluded to above, they are characteristically dominated by the local petty-bourgeois intelligentsia who have the support of the popular masses. However, it is nonetheless clear that these organs are far more democratic than any Western-type of parliamentary democracy and that they reflect – albeit in a primitive and distorted way – the will of the popular masses. Therefore, despite all their limitations, activists can justifiably characterize the LCCs as an “*underground parliament*.”⁶

In other words, the LCCs (as well as the hundreds of local militias) reflect the *plebian class base* of the Syrian revolution which rests on the support of the workers, the poor peasants and the lower strata of the urban and rural petty-bourgeoisie.

⁶ Assad an-Nar: Socialism and the Democratic Wager, in: Jules Alford and Andy Wilson (Editors): Khiyana. Daesh, the Left and the Unmaking of the Syrian Revolution, p. 39

Part II

The Contradictory Nature of the Petty-Bourgeois Rebel Factions

As we noted in the introduction, many leftists justify having dropped their support for the Syrian Revolution by claiming that the rebels have become "reactionary Jihadists" and/or proxies of US imperialism and the regional powers.

To address this contention, let us first summarize the general development of the armed rebels fighting against the Assad dictatorship. The Syrian Revolution began as a peaceful movement of mass demonstrations in March 2011. When the regime began to indiscriminately arrest, torture and kill protestors, the protest was transformed into an armed civil war.

This was not a surprising development, seeing how no ruling class ever relinquishes power without a fight. For historical reasons, which are beyond the scope of this document, the ruling class in Syria – similar to the case of Libya with the Gaddafi clan – has been dominated since the early 1970s by a single clan (the Assad family). This is the reason that, in Syria, it was not possible to follow the model of the ruling classes of Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen who made concessions to the popular protest by replacing one president with another, without losing their economic and political power as a class.

When the regime tried to drown the protests in blood, people spontaneously took up arms and many soldiers (and officers) deserted their units because they were not prepared to kill their compatriots. Out of these men (and some women) emerged the hundreds, if not thousands, of local militias. Let us state the matter unambiguously: Not only was the creation of these popular militias a *necessary* step in that they provided the workers and peasants the means to defend themselves against a genocidal regime, but their creation was also an enormous *progressive step from a revolutionary perspective*.

However, from the start, these militias lacked weaponry, as they only had those weapons which they captured from Assad's army. Furthermore, they lacked a clear strategy and coordination among themselves which, again, resulted from their lack of political perspective (which, again, we attribute to the lack of a revolutionary Marxist leadership).

By the time some loose alliances emerged, with the *Syrian National Council* (SNC) and later the *Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* as the political representative of the opposition, they were characteristically heterogeneous alliances of bourgeois liberal, ex-Stalinist, nationalist and Islamist (in particular the *Muslim Brotherhood*) parties. The LCC movement was also part of the *National Coalition*. Also, a number of militias constituted the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) as the military alliance of the revolution.

As we have written repeatedly in the past, the *Syrian National Council*, as well as the *Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces*, proved to be fragmented and were dominated by intellectuals living in exile who only had weak roots within the country. These bodies called for the overthrow of the Assad regime and advocated a liberal democracy as its alternative. They hoped to

receive recognition from the "international community," i.e. the Great Powers, and financial and military support from the Western imperialists.⁷

As an aside, we note the existence of yet another organization, the *National Coordination Committee*, which is composed mostly of groups and individuals who split with the main Baathist and Stalinist parties. At the start of the revolution, they were a kind of official opposition tolerated by Assad which called for "non-violent resistance" and a "dialogue with the regime." Unsurprisingly, they had only very little popular support and were despised by the revolutionaries. In 2012, they began joining the call for the overthrow of the regime. However, they remain very small and their goals do not go beyond bourgeois democracy.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has always been a loose alliance without an effective military command. In addition, they became increasingly discredited as a number of FSA leaders proved to be self-serving, corrupt and incompetent. While the FSA does not function as a centralized command, numerous brigades and groups affiliate themselves with this alliance.

While the leaderships of the SNC and the FSA were hoping for decisive help from the West, this never arrived. Support was mostly rhetorical and diplomatic, but in terms of finances and heavy weaponry the rebels hardly received anything. Because US imperialism could not control the rebels it didn't trust them and refused to send modern anti-aircraft missiles and similar desperately needed weaponry. A few small units were trained by the CIA, but the US stopped the program when these units were overrun and disarmed by the Islamist militias.⁸

As a result of the failures of the SNC and FSA, scores and even hundreds of groups either broke with them or were independent from the beginning. Most of these groups combine – to varying degrees – petty-bourgeois nationalism and Islamism. Many of them joined – often unstable and temporary – alliances. Today, the most prominent of these petty-bourgeois Islamist alliances are *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya* (or *Ahrār al-Shām*, Islamic Movement of the Free People of the Levant) and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (Al-Nusra Front). The latter was affiliated with Al-Qaida, but officially broke with it in 2016. Through a process of fusion with other Islamist (*Ansar al-Din Front*, *Jaysh al-Sunna*, *Liwa al-Haqq*) and FSA brigades (*Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement*), these organizations recently founded the *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS, Organization for the Liberation of the Levant). In addition, up to 60,000 fighters are organized in small, local, unaffiliated militias.

In general, events have shown that virtually all of these alliances are loose and relatively unstable. The results are recurring splits and fusions between the hundreds of local brigades, demonstrating how alliances are formed (and broken) not so much on ideological grounds but rather on practical considerations. This local orientation of most rebel militias, with strong roots in the regional population, also manifests itself in their operations being determined in large part by pressure from their popular base, the military necessities of the local situation, rather than any nationwide or foreign considerations.

⁷ See e.g. Yossi Schwartz: Victory to the Revolution in Syria! The second anniversary of the uprising in Syria, 15.3.2013, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/victory-to-syrian-revolution/>

⁸ See e.g., Tom Perry, Suleiman Al-Khalidi and John Walcott: Exclusive: CIA-backed aid for Syrian rebels frozen after Islamist attack - sources, Reuters, Feb 21, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idUSKBN1601BD>

According to estimates, there are some 200,000 armed Syrian rebels (not counting the Kurdish militias which number about 60,000 fighters).⁹ This is a very high proportion of the population relative to that of Syria as a whole, which on the eve of the revolution numbered 22 million (approximately 5 million of whom subsequently fled the country), and an even higher proportion relative to that portion of the population currently living in the increasingly smaller liberated areas controlled by the revolutionaries!

A note on the adjectival juxtaposition of "progressive" to liberal democrats versus "reactionary" to Islamists

At this point it becomes necessary to state that we entirely reject the dichotomization – so widespread among the pseudo-Marxist left – between "progressive" liberal democrats and "reactionary" Islamists. While these leftists support struggles led by the former, they refuse any support for struggles by the latter.

Naturally, we don't ignore that, generally speaking, liberal democrats hold more progressive views on women's rights and accept a pluralism of opinions, among other things, than most Islamists do. But at the same time we have seen so often how liberals become servants of Western imperialism. Let's just recall how closely the leaders of the *Syrian National Council* were willing to collaborate with the US and EU (but these Great Powers were not prepared to lend them any serious support). Furthermore, how can one forget that many of these liberal democrats (plus their Stalinist and centrists friends) applauded the military coup in Egypt in 2013 and refused to defend the pro-Mursi masses against the slaughter which followed 3 July?!

To this one has to add the horrible crimes of the Western imperialist powers – first of all the US – who have always been the role model of liberal democracy with which the liberal democrats in the South mostly identify. In fact, the crimes of imperialist "democracy" far outstrip those of Daesh, to say nothing about other Islamist movements. In March 2015, the Washington DC-based *Physicians for Social Responsibility* (PRS) released a landmark study concluding that the death toll from 10 years of "War on Terror" since the 9/11 attacks is at least 1.3 million, and could be as high as 2 million. The study also estimates the total deaths from Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan since the 1990s – from direct killings and the longer-term impact of war-imposed deprivation. They reach the conclusion that the number of deaths is likely around 4 million (2 million in Iraq from 1991-2003, plus 2 million from the "War on Terror").¹⁰

⁹ See e.g., Fabrice Balanche: Status of the Syrian Rebellion: Numbers, Ideologies, and Prospects, November 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects>; Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande: Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers, Middle East Security Report 29, Institute for the Study of War, March 2016; Wikipedia: Syrian Civil War, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_Civil_War

¹⁰ Nafeez Ahmed: Unworthy victims: Western wars have killed four million Muslims since 1990, 8 April 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/unworthy-victims-western-wars-have-killed-four-million-muslims-1990-39149394>. On the RCIT's analysis of the imperialist wars and the position of Marxists see e.g. Michael Pröbsting: *The Great Robbery of the South. Continuity and Changes in the Super-Exploitation of the Semi-Colonial World* by

In other words, in decisive situations, liberal democrats turn out not to be so democratic, but rather pro-imperialist and pro-dictatorship (if the regime is capitalist and secular). Given the lack of a revolutionary leadership, the petty-bourgeois Islamists are given the chance to opportunistically exploit the crimes of the "liberal-democratic" Great Powers and to present themselves as the *only* consistent anti-imperialist force.

Naturally, there are many shades among Islamist forces. Some – like the *Jamā'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (the Muslim Brotherhood) – try to combine Sharia law with capitalist democracy (for instance, the Mursi government in Egypt). Others want to create a reactionary Caliphate without democratic institutions. However, we have always insisted that Marxists have to judge Islamist movements by their *current* role in any given concrete struggle. And, as we have elaborated in our *Theses on Islamism*, history has shown that, given their betrayal of Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, Islamist currents have managed many times to stand at the forefront of mass movements against dictatorships and for national liberation.¹¹ To give just a few examples, we cite the cases of Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Yemen, etc.

Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham and Other Islamist Militias

Another factor demonstrating the popular character of the rebels is their class composition. They are dominated by urban and rural workers and poor. This class composition is directly related to the historic discrimination of the Sunni majority in Syria by the Assad regime. It was no accident that the uprising started with mass demonstrations in cities like Daraa, Homs, or Hama and that it had its strongholds in the proletarian and poor districts of Aleppo and Damascus. Since the close of the 19th century, East Aleppo – which the rebels managed to hold until the end of 2016 – has been proletarian in character, in contrast to the middle class western part of the city. Similarly, even today, it is the working class suburbs of Damascus like Qaboun, Jobar and Eastern Ghouta which the rebels control.

Naturally, in the wake of the revolution's defeats and setbacks, millions of workers and urban poor have had to flee – as we noted above, nearly half of the entire population of Syria has become refugees, whether internal or those 5 million who have migrated abroad! However, this doesn't change the fact that the rebels are deeply rooted among the popular masses.

In our opinion, it is vital to understand the *contradictory nature* of the rebels. On the one hand, their composition is essentially popular, as they are recruited from the poor masses. Furthermore, as they have no state apparatus or foreign troops behind them, they are entirely dependent on popular support. This popular character must be compared with the areas under control of the Assad regime, where there is a centralized bourgeois state apparatus, notorious for its brutality and corruption. In regime-held areas where the state apparatus has been weakened, the vacuum has been filled by private armed gangs linked to local businessmen. This demonstrates, once again, why it is that the rebels essentially represent the democratic revolution, i.e., one aimed at toppling the Assad

Monopoly Capital Consequences for the Marxist Theory of Imperialism, 2013, (in particular chapter 12 and 13) <http://www.great-robbery-of-the-south.net/>

¹¹ Michael Pröbsting and Simon Hardy: *Theses on Islamism*, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/theses-on-islamism/>

dictatorship and achieving national independence (irrespective of the ideological cover of its participants).

The contradictory, undemocratic aspect of the rebel forces is the result of attempts by various Western powers to increase their influence among the leaderships of different rebel movements by means of political pressure and limited financial support. Naturally, such foreign influence is much less than that exercised by Russia and Iran on the Assad regime. Nevertheless, it constitutes a reactionary influence in the ranks of the rebels.

On the other side of the barricades, typically nearly the entire Syrian bourgeoisie – including those of Sunni background – has always supported the Assad regime. While some businessmen from the Syrian Diaspora do lend their support to the rebels (thereby adding another reactionary factor to the resistance), the huge majority still supports Assad.¹²

The most important Islamist formations in Syria today are *Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham* (formerly the Nusra Front) followed by *Ahrar al-Sham*. While the former is said to have 31,000 fighters, the latter numbers about 20,000 persons under arms. These formations, in particular *Tahrir al-Sham*, are replete with internal contradictions. On the one hand, they represent the tendency among the rebels which resolutely refuses to compromise with the regime and to capitulate to the pressure of the Great Powers. For this reason it's no accident that the US and other Western imperialist power began castigating al-Nusra, but also other groups like Ahrar al-Sham, as "terrorist organizations" soon after their formation in late 2011 and early 2012. Since 2014, US imperialism systematically targets the leaders of these organizations and has already succeeded in liquidating a number of them.

Tahrir al-Sham sharply denounces those forces among the rebels who collaborate with US imperialism. They similarly attack as "capitulators" those rebel forces who are prepared to participate in the Astrana negotiations controlled by Russia, Iran and the Assad regime.

Among these petty-bourgeois Islamist forces there are undoubtedly many dedicated fighters playing a vanguard role in the struggle against the regime and its Russian and Iranian backers. At the same time, these organizations maintain links with various wealthy donors in Gulf States. It is here that their contradictory nature becomes manifest, for they combine an *essentially progressive struggle* against the bloody Assad dictatorship with the perspective of a *reactionary social order*. Furthermore, these groups are Islamist chauvinist in nature, entirely denying the Kurds' national rights, while pursuing a virulent Sunni nationalism. They justify their reactionary sectarianism against the Shia minority of Syria by referring to them as agents of Iran. In other words, they fail – as nationalists typically do – to differentiate between the reactionary ruling class of Iran and Syria and the ordinary Shia workers and poor who must be won over to the side of revolution.

For these reasons we characterize forces like *Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham* (formerly the al-Nusra Front) or *Ahrar al-Sham* as petty-bourgeois Islamists of the *Salafi-Nationalists* type. In contrast to them, we note

¹² See on this, e.g., Samer Abboud: The Economics of War and Peace in Syria. Stratification and Factionalization in the Business Community, January 31, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/>; Revolutionary Left Current: The Syrian bourgeoisie and the people's revolution, <http://revleftcurrentsyria.com/articles-and-statements-in-english/the-syrian-bourgeoisie-and-the-peoples-revolution/>

as an aside, we characterize Daesh as a *Salafi-Takfiri* organization which does not support the Syrian Revolution, and sees everyone but themselves as a *Kuffar* ("unbelievers" deserving death).¹³

The Role of Religion in Democratic and National Liberation Struggles

One favorite argument against supporting the Syrian popular forces that have petty-bourgeois Islamists as their leadership is that such forces, defending as they do a religious agenda, are thoroughly backward. However, as Marxists we do not judge forces primarily by their ideology but by the social forces which they represent in a concrete struggle between the classes. In the case of Syria, this is the urban and rural poor – led by petty-bourgeois nationalists and Islamists – who are fighting against the Assad regime representing the bourgeoisie (plus their imperialist and Iranian backers) and most of the wealthy middle class.

We have elaborated extensively in other documents that Marxists have to understand the role of religion – as is the case with ideology in general – materialistically.¹⁴ This means that Marxists have to view religion primarily as a distorted expression of social interests – in cases like the Syrian Revolution, the hatred of a specific dictatorship or of a foreign occupier. This is often the role of ideology in the consciousness of the masses, as Engels explained in a letter to Franz Mehring in 1893:

*"Ideology is a process which of course is carried on with the consciousness of the so-called thinker but with a false consciousness. The real driving forces which move him, he remains unaware of, otherwise it would not be an ideological process. He therefore imagines false or apparent driving forces."*¹⁵

It is therefore not surprising that liberation struggles have taken place many times under the banner of religion. Engels, referring to the peasant wars in Europe in the 16th century, wrote:

*"In the so-called religious wars of the Sixteenth Century, very positive material class-interests were at play, and those wars were class wars just as were the later collisions in England and France. If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation, and is to be explained by conditions of the time."*¹⁶

While a religious and socially conservative agenda like that championed by *Tahrir al-Sham* and others reflects the reactionary character of these petty-bourgeois Islamist leaderships, it is important for Marxists to learn from history that anti-dictatorial and national liberation movements have repeatedly worn religious garb. This was not only the case in the European peasant uprisings in the Middle Ages,

¹³ For a closer analysis of Daesh as a counter-revolutionary formation we refer to the RCIT's theses: The Revolutionary Struggle against Daesh and the Imperialist Aggression in the Middle East, 28.02.2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/resolution-daesh/>

¹⁴ See, e.g., ISL: Islam, Islamism and the Struggle for Revolution, November 2016, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/islam-and-revolution/>; Yossi Schwartz: The Marxist View of Religion in General and Islam in Particular, December 2016, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/marxism-and-islam/>; Michael Pröbsting and Simon Hardy: Theses on Islamism, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/theses-on-islamism/>

¹⁵ Friedrich Engels: Letter to Franz Mehring (July 14, 1893), in: MECW Vol. 50, p. 164

¹⁶ Friedrich Engels: The Peasant War in Germany (1850), in: MECW Vol. 10, p. 412

but also in the Bahia Muslim slave rebellion in Brazil in 1835, in the *Taiping Revolution* in China from 1850 to 1864¹⁷, in the *Boxer rebellion* in China in 1900,¹⁸ for the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* in Iran in the 1970s, or in the cases of *Hamas* and the *Palestinian Islamic Jihad* or the Afghan *Talibans* today, to name only a few examples.

However, while Marxists obviously reject the socially conservative agenda of such movements, they cannot and must not ignore the democratic and revolutionary class interests which lurk behind the religious fog, as these manifest the determination of the oppressed popular classes to overthrow a reactionary dictatorship or a foreign imperialist invader. Marxists have to support and relate to this progressive class interest and oppose such movements' reactionary politics so as to be able to break the workers and oppressed away from the Islamist leaderships and to win them over to revolutionary politics.

Some Arguments on the Ongoing Progressive Character of the Syrian Revolution

One of the many indicators of the liberation character of a war on the side of revolutionary forces and the reactionary character of a war on the side of the regime and its foreign backers is the regime's continuously applying military tactics of annihilation against the civilian population living in areas under control of the rebels. The forces backing of the regime systematically and indiscriminately bomb the towns and villages being held by the rebels. This is why hundreds of thousands of Syrians (at least 400,000 according to official estimates, but most likely many more) have been killed – mostly at the hands of Assad's forces – with the result that half of the Syrian population has been forced to flee their homes.

On the other hand, rebel forces do not typically apply systematic bombardment of the civilian population as a prime military tactic. Naturally, the military struggle against the Assadist forces also takes its toll on civilians. But, while broad and systematic indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas is in fact the primary tactic of the regime and its Russian and Iranian backers, this is *not* the case with the rebels.

This is no accident: the regime – despised by the majority of the population – must drive out large sectors of the people so that it can maintain or regain control of regions of the country. The rebels –

¹⁷ The *Taiping Revolution* was a social-revolutionary movement of miners, poor peasants and ethnic minorities against the corrupt Qing dynasty which aimed to create an "*Heavenly Kingdom of Peace*" and which was organized by an millenarian sect known as the God Worshipping Society led by Hong Xiuquan, who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. See on this, e.g., Franz Michael and Chung-li Chang: *The Taiping Rebellion. History and Documents Vol.1*, University of Washington Press, London 1966; Stephen R. Platt: *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom : China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2012.

¹⁸ The *Boxer rebellion* was a Chinese nationalist insurrection with the initial tacit support of the Qing dynasty directed against the imperialist powers. They considered the Christian missionaries as foreign agents and massacred about 30,000 Christians (many of them were beheaded). See on this, e.g., Joseph Esherick: *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, University of California Press, London 1987; Larry Clinton Thompson: *William Scott Ament and the Boxer Rebellion. Heroism, Hubris and the "Ideal Missionary,"* McFarland & Company, London 2009.

lacking the huge military arsenal and the financial backing of foreign powers that the regime has – needs, on the other hand, popular support.¹⁹

Why is this so in the case of Syria? Simply, the Assad regime has very little popular support outside of the small Alawite sect and they are all too acutely aware that they are despised by the vast majority of the population. Furthermore, the regime also understands that it lacks the military resources required to establish a stable rule over the people of Syria. Therefore, it must do everything in its power to uproot and expel large portions of the population which sympathize with the revolution.

It is for this reason that the Assad regime places towns liberated by the rebels under siege – adopting the notorious tactics deployed by Putin's Russian army against the Chechens in Grozny in 1999-2000 (which left it "*the most ravaged city on Earth*" according to the United Nations) – and formulate surrender deals which require the rebels and the population to leave liberated areas subdued by the regime, forcing them to move to territories which are still under the control of liberation fighters (e.g., the province of Idlib).

Another argument which used by some to demonstrate the loss of the revolution's progressive character cites local protest against the Salafist militias, and the counterrevolutionary repression by which such protests are put down. There can be no doubt that such incidents clearly demonstrate how such militias constitute a reactionary danger to all the democratic liberties won through the revolution.

However, we must not forget that the very existence of such demonstrations in the liberated areas actually affirms the revolutionary and democratic character of the liberation struggle being waged by the rebels who control a given region. Can we possibly imagine such protests ever taking place in those areas controlled by Assad? Of course not! All such protests were drowned in rivers of blood in 2011, which is precisely the reason that the revolution had to be transformed into an armed civil war against the dictatorship.

Have the Rebels Become Agents of US Imperialism and Regional Powers?

An argument often given for refusing to support the Syrian revolutionaries is that they are in fact "agents of US imperialism" or of regional powers. As we shall demonstrate, this argument is reactionary slander and simply stupid.

Let's start with the "strong" side of this argument: It is certainly true that there have been contacts and tacit support by the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for this or that faction of the rebels. During the first phase of the revolution, the US and the regional powers hoped to replace Assad with another figure, without at the same time disrupting the Baathist state apparatus. This was particularly true of the Erdoğan regime in Turkey, which sought to destabilize its local rival while at the same time gaining popularity among Turkey's Sunni-majority population which identified with the uprising of their sectarian brothers and sisters in Syria.

¹⁹ It is remarkable that even the counterrevolutionary and barbarian Daesh hardly applies the genocidal tactics which are so characteristic of the regime and their Russian and Iranian backers.

However, the point is that such support for the rebels by the Erdoğan regime was always limited. It never came close to the systematic support of Russian imperialism and the Iranian regime for Assad. This is why the Syrian rebels have always been at a total disadvantage from a military point of view when compared with the Assadist forces. If the US (or Turkey or the Gulf States) would have seriously supported the rebels, they would have done much more than simply support them with their air force (as Russia did for Assad). Rather, they would have sent tanks, artillery and BMP's (as the Russians in fact did for Assad). But the only tanks which the rebels possess are those which they have captured from their enemies! Furthermore, these foreign powers would have sent anti-aircraft missiles to the rebels in order to end the terror brought down upon them from the sky. But the Western imperialists did not do so because they never wanted the popular revolution in Syria to be victorious.

At this point, we must address the idiocy of the claim that the rebels are "agents" of the US or Turkey. As a matter of fact, the US and Turkey *are* increasingly intervening in Syria. They are deploying their air forces and bombing their "opponents." They are increasingly sending their soldiers and heavy weaponry into battle. If the "agent theory" were true, the US and Turkey should, it would seem, be intervening on the side of the rebels fighting Assad. But as everyone knows, this is not what's happening. Quite the contrary: the US and Turkey are not deploying their military power against Assad, but against Daesh and Islamist factions of the rebels (in particular *Tahrir al-Sham*)! The US air force has repeatedly attacked various Islamist rebels and killed a number of their leaders. Turkey – with Erdoğan looking for an alliance with Putin – put pressure on militias to leave the Aleppo front when the Syrian people were under siege in Eastern Aleppo and needed the militias the most! How idiotic is the argument that the rebels fighting against Assad are supposedly agents of the US, when the latter doesn't care about attacking the Assadist forces, but rather the Islamists! In fact, very early on in the war the US designated several Islamist rebel militias as "terrorist organizations." Only fools can claim that these militias are the supposed allies of imperialism!

Part III

On Foreign Powers' Support for Liberation Movements

In fact, history is replete with examples of democratic and national liberation movements' receiving tacit support from adversaries of the regimes against which those rebels were fighting. German imperialism supported the Irish revolutionaries fighting British occupation during WWI; the British supported the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire; France and the USSR lent support to the Spanish Republic in 1936-39; the Allies supported the Tito partisans and the Chinese nationalist forces during WWII; during the same war Nazis lent support to Arab nationalists like Nasser who opposed British occupation; during the Cold War, the USSR lend support to numerous national liberation movements as did Cuba in Latin America; various African governments supported SWAPO and the ANC; nearly all Arab states supported the PLO, etc.

Let's also take some more current examples: *Hamas* and the *Palestinian Islamic Jihad* receive substantial political, financial and military support from Iran, Qatar, Turkey and other states; Kashmiri independence fighters receive support from Pakistan and, vice versa; Baloch nationalists receive support from India. We could go on and on with many similar examples. The decisive question is: Does such support by foreign powers necessarily transform these organizations into agents of these states (as the Israeli, Indian, Pakistani and other governments have been claiming for years)? Of course not! True, the governments of these states have an (obviously negative) influence on the leaderships of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other movements. But does such support transform these movements into agents of these states? No, and it was only reactionaries who have denounced these movements as "agents" of the adversarial power.

Why are such reactionary claims slanderous? Because *all* these movements which receive aid and support from regimes adversarial to their oppressor authentically have substantial roots in the struggles of the oppressed classes. Therefore, these movements are *primarily* an expression of the desire of these classes to free themselves from oppression and occupation, and are not *fundamentally* an expression of the interests of foreign states.

Naturally, Marxists must draw attention to and emphasize the contradictory character of such movements, which have usually been led by petty-bourgeois forces. Naturally, these leaderships have been much more prone to the pressure exerted by their allies, which means that such support undoubtedly constitutes a conservative and negative influence. Marxists *always* fight against such influence. But the crucial issue here is that such negative influence *does not negate* the fundamentally popular and progressive character of these liberation struggles led by such forces.

So the question becomes, when does interference and influence of foreign powers transform a liberation movement into an agent of such powers? In our program – *The Revolutionary Communist Manifesto* – we stated our approach and gave some actual examples.

"Particularly, where authoritarian regimes or the military openly trample on democratic rights, mass movements rise and fight with determination for their rights. Other states and even great imperialist powers try to exploit such domestic crises and are only too happy to expand their influence. The Bolsheviks-Communists support any

real movement of the popular masses against the suppression of democratic rights. We reject any influence of reactionary forces and defend the national sovereignty of semi-colonial countries against imperialism. This can not mean that revolutionaries renounce the support of revolutionary-democratic movement. In reality, the imperialist meddling is no help for the revolutionary-democratic struggle, but threatens to undermine it. That is why we have supported progressive liberation struggles of the masses against dictatorships, but at the same time rejected sharply imperialist interventions. (E.g. the struggle of the Bosnians 1992-95, the Kosovo Albanians in 1999, the uprising against the Gaddafi dictatorship in Libya in 2011). Only when the imperialist intervention is becoming the dominant feature of the political situation, revolutionaries must subordinate the democratic struggle to the fight against such an intervention." ²⁰

In our essay "*Liberation Struggles and Imperialist Interference*" we dealt with this issue in more detail and discussed it with a number of historical examples. In conclusion we wrote:

"The key is always to concretely analyze whether a given democratic or national liberation struggle becomes entirely subordinate to the imperialist maneuvers and no longer possesses any significant internal dynamic of a workers and peasant liberation struggle. If this is the case, Marxists must change their position and give up critical support for the given national liberation struggle." ²¹

We have to now ask: To what degree does such a situation exist in Syria today. In our opinion, this is most certainly *not* the case with the Syrian rebels. However, another case is that of the so-called *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) which consist mostly of the Kurdish YPG plus a few Syrian-Arab allies. While the Kurdish militias number about 60,000 fighters, their Syrian-Arab allies account for only a few thousand. The SDF forces as a whole are clearly and massively supported by US imperialism in their fight against Daesh. The US is supporting the Kurdish militias with massive air strikes as well as with up to 1,000 American soldiers on the ground. While, in the past, we supported the defense of the Kurdish minority against attacks by Daesh, the situation has now clearly changed. Currently the SDF/YPG – so beloved by the centrist left! – is serving as a counter-revolutionary spearhead for US (as well as Russian) imperialism in order to pacify the Syrian Revolution and divide Syria under auspices of the Great Powers. ²² The SDF/YPG is even volunteering its services to imperialism and, following the conquest of Raqqa, are offering to take Idlib in order to finish off the encircled Syrian

²⁰ RCIT: The Revolutionary Communist Manifesto, pp. 45-46, www.thecommunists.net/rcit-manifesto/revolutionary-struggle-for-democracy

²¹ Michael Pröbsting: Liberation Struggles and Imperialist Interference. The failure of sectarian "anti-imperialism" in the West: Some general considerations from the Marxist point of view and the example of the democratic revolution in Libya in 2011", in: RCIT: Revolutionary Communism, No. 5; <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/liberation-struggle-and-imperialism>

²² On this, see e.g., Tom Perry: Syrian militias get more U.S. support for IS fight, plan new phase, Reuters, Jan 31, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-arms-idUSKBN15F15S>; Al Jazeera: Syrian Kurds say Russia to build base in Afrin. In agreement with Kurds, Russia to operate military base in Afrin and train YPG fighters in 'anti-terror' combat, 20 March 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/russia-strikes-deal-syrian-kurds-set-base-170320142545942.html>; US Arab Spring policy? Third party counter-revolution, 3.3.2017, https://eternispring.wordpress.com/2017/03/03/us-arab-spring-policy-third-party-counter-revolution/?fb_action_ids=1414757321930172&fb_action_types=news.publishes; SDF attack on Marea is US policy – and Syria's attempted end-game, 19.2.2017, <https://eternispring.wordpress.com/2016/02/19/sdf-attack-on-marea-is-us-policy-and-syrias-attempted-end-game/>; Brief thoughts: Syrians' rejection of the so-called "Syrian Democratic Forces" sends a clear message to the US – We define our revolution, not you, 29.2.2017, <https://eternispring.wordpress.com/2016/02/29/brief-thoughts-syrians-rejection-of-the-so-called-syrian-democratic-forces-sends-a-clear-message-to-the-us-we-define-our-revolution-not-you/>

revolutionaries! ²³ Since the autumn of 2016, the SDF/YPG has been besieging Raqqa and other Arab-populated areas in the service of US imperialism. In such a situation, revolutionaries must not side with them, the imperialist lackeys (i.e., SDF/YPG) but should rather call for their defeat, even if they are fighting against reactionary Daesh forces. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, we refer reader to the recently published article by our comrade Yossi Schwartz. ²⁴

A similar situation might exist with the so-called *Operation Euphrates Shield* led by the Turkish army which includes several Syrian rebel militias (again only a few thousands fighters).

Finally, one can test the "agent theory" by simply comparing the deeds of the Syrian rebels with the interests of the foreign powers. The interest of US imperialism is to destroy Daesh, but not to wage a war against Assad. Yes, some small units of the rebels are joining the Kurdish militias in this effort as part of the SDF. But nearly all Syrian rebels refuse to do so and continue the war of liberation against the Assadist forces. Obviously, they are not acting according to US priorities. Turkey's main interests are to fight the Kurdish militias as well as Daesh. Again, yes, some Syrian militias have joined *Operation Euphrates Shield*, but the bulk of the rebels have not. In other words, the "agent theory" is nothing but disinformation designed to destroy the legitimacy of the Syrian Revolution!

As a side note, we call the reader's attention to the fact that the same nonsensical "agent theory" is deployed by some ultra-left sects like the Moreonite FLTI. While the latter organization supports the Syrian Revolution – in clear contrast to the abstentionists – they attack *all* rebel leaderships not only because of their incorrect policy (which, of course, is correct), but they also denounce them as "agents" of foreign powers. In doing so the FLTI unintentionally only helps the enemies of the Syrian Revolution by espousing such unmaterialistic nonsense.

In summary, until now, after six years since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution, the vast majority of the Syrian rebels are not fighting under the command of the US or Turkey, and are most certainly not subordinating the struggle against the Assad regime to the geostrategic interests of these foreign powers (i.e., the struggle against Daesh or against the Kurdish YPG).

Of course, we cannot preclude such a development in the future. It is possible that, with the accumulating defeats of the Syrian Revolution, various leaderships of rebel militias may capitulate to the pressure of foreign powers and become "pragmatic." They might be tempted to start serving as tools for advancing the geostrategic interests of foreign powers, in order to save for themselves at least a small part of the post-war order in Syria. Such a development is quite possible and, if it takes place, revolutionaries will have to adapt their assessments and tactics. But Marxists don't develop tactics based on speculation about future possibilities, but only on the concrete relation of forces and on the current military situation on the ground. And today, most militias can by no means be characterized as being "agents" of foreign powers.

In conclusion, let us state that, for Marxists, it is vital to correctly understand the relationship between liberation struggles and imperialist interference, not only for the case of the Syrian Revolution, but also to be prepared for future developments.

²³ *Kurdish YPG commander: We will go to Idlib after liberating Raqqa from ISIS*, <http://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2017/29-march-kurdish-ypg-commander-we-will-go-to-idlib-after>

²⁴ See Yossi Schwartz: Raqqa: Defeat the US Imperialist Offensive! An assessment of the US/SDF/YPG war against Daesh, April 2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/us-offensive-in-raqqa/>

Some years ago we warned: "*Such complications, amalgamations of different and contradictory interests in a given military conflict are likely to increase in the future. Why? Because of the increasing rivalry between imperialist powers. Due to this rivalry, all imperialist powers are more and more motivated to interfere in local conflicts and civil wars and to exploit them so as to advance their influence and increase their profits. Unfortunately, this trend is completely ignored by many sectarians who fail to recognize that in addition to the old imperialist powers – in North America, Western Europe, and Japan – there are also new, emerging imperialist powers, in particular Russia and China.*"²⁵

The case of Syria has affirmed this warning and, in the future, there will be even more similar situations. If revolutionaries fail to analyze such developments concretely and correctly, and if they fail to support liberation struggles because of this or that interference by foreign powers, they cease to be revolutionaries and become traitors.

Lenin and Trotsky on Liberation Struggles and Imperialist Interference

Lenin and Trotsky were, of course, aware that, in the epoch of imperialism, the Great Powers will always try to interfere and utilize national and democratic conflicts for their own ends. However, from this they did not conclude that Marxists should automatically drop their support for such democratic and national liberation struggles. Rather, the position taken by Marxists should depend on which factor becomes dominant – the national, democratic liberation struggle or the imperialist war of conquest.

„Britain and France fought the Seven Years’ War for the possession of colonies. In other words, they waged an imperialist war (which is possible on the basis of slavery and primitive capitalism as well as on the basis of modern highly developed capitalism). France suffered defeat and lost some of her colonies. Several years later there began the national liberation war of the North American States against Britain alone. France and Spain, then in possession of some parts of the present United States, concluded a friendship treaty with the States in rebellion against Britain. This they did out of hostility to Britain, i.e., in their own imperialist interests. French troops fought the British on the side of the American forces. What we have here is a national liberation war in which imperialist rivalry is an auxiliary element, one that has no serious importance. This is the very opposite to what we see in the war of 1914-16 (the national element in the Austro-Serbian War is of no serious importance compared with the all-determining element of imperialist rivalry). It would be absurd, therefore, to apply the concept imperialism indiscriminately and conclude that national wars are “impossible”. A national liberation war, waged, for example, by an alliance of Persia, India and China against one or more of the imperialist powers, is both possible and probable, for it would follow from the national liberation movements in these countries. The transformation of such a war into an imperialist war between the present-day imperialist powers would depend upon very many concrete factors, the emergence of which it would be ridiculous to guarantee.”²⁶

²⁵ Michael Pröbsting: Liberation struggles and imperialist interference. The failure of sectarian “anti-imperialism” in the West: Some general considerations from the Marxist point of view and the example of the democratic revolution in Libya in 2011”, in: RCIT: Revolutionary Communism, No. 5; <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/liberation-struggle-and-imperialism>

²⁶ V. I. Lenin: The Junius Pamphlet (1916); in: LCW 22, pp. 310-11

In another article, Lenin compared imperialist interference in national liberation struggles for their own ends with the interference of sections of monopoly capital in democratic struggles within imperialist countries. In both cases, Lenin argued, it would be wrong to deny support for these struggles because of this interference:

„On the other hand, the socialists of the oppressed nations must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organisational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries in face of all manner of intrigues, treachery and trickery on the part of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations persistently utilise the slogans of national liberation to deceive the workers; in their internal policy they use these slogans for reactionary agreements with the bourgeoisie of the dominant nation (for example, the Poles in Austria and Russia who come to terms with reactionaries for the oppression of the Jews and Ukrainians); in their foreign policy they strive to come to terms with one of the rival imperialist powers for the sake of implementing their predatory plans (the policy of the small Balkan states, etc.). The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain conditions, be utilised by another “great” power for its own, equally imperialist, aims, is just as unlikely to make the Social-Democrats refuse to recognise the right of nations to self-determination as the numerous cases of bourgeois utilisation of republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial plunder (as in the Romance countries, for example) are unlikely to make the Social-Democrats reject their republicanism.”²⁷

Therefore, we see that those who propagate an abstentionist or Third Camp position in the Syrian civil war because of Western interference can find no support in the writings of Lenin.

What Did Lenin and Trotsky Say about Getting Support from Imperialists?

Many leftists justify their refusal to support the Syrian rebels by claiming that they receive financial and military support from Western imperialists as well as from Turkey and the Gulf States. As we have already said, whatever support is thereby received is clearly not significant, as it has not altered the military inferiority of the rebels on the ground relative to the forces of Assad.

Irrespective of this, it is important for Marxists to understand that a liberation movement's receiving such aid from imperialists is, in itself, not illegitimate and therefore provides no justification for discrediting the liberation movement as an "agent of a foreign power." However, Lenin and Trotsky stressed as crucial the refusal of the liberation movement to accept *any* political conditions for receiving such aid. In other words, liberation movements must *not* subordinate their struggle to the interests of the imperialists from whom they receive such aid.

Lenin and Trotsky were quiet explicit on this issue, and it would be useful for various pseudo-Marxist muddleheads to take their advice to heart. In February 1918, Lenin defended the right of the Bolshevik government to take economic and military support from the imperialist Allies in order to defend themselves against the German Empire. In a polemic directed against Bukharin and other ultra-left inner-party opponents he wrote:

²⁷ V. I. Lenin: *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1916); in: LCW 22, p. 148

"What, for example, could be more conclusive and clear than the following truth: a government that gave Soviet power, land, workers' control and peace to a people tortured by three years of predatory war would be invincible? Peace is the chief thing. If, after conscientious efforts to obtain a general and just peace, it turned out in actual fact that it was impossible to obtain this at the present time, every peasant would understand that one would have to adopt not a general peace, but a separate and unjust peace. Every peasant, even the most ignorant and illiterate, would understand this and appreciate a government that gave him even such a peace.

Bolsheviks must have been stricken by the vile itch of phrase-making to forget this and evoke the peasants' most legitimate dissatisfaction with them when this itch has led to a new war being launched by predatory Germany against overtired Russia! (...)

If Kerensky, a representative of the ruling class of the bourgeoisie, i.e., the exploiters, makes a deal with the Anglo-French exploiters to get arms and potatoes from them and at the same time conceals from the people the treaties which promise (if successful) to give one robber Armenia, Galicia and Constantinople, and another robber Baghdad, Syria and so forth, is it difficult to understand that this deal is a predatory, swindling, vile deal on the part of Kerensky and his friends? No, this is not difficult to understand. Any peasant, even the most ignorant and illiterate, will understand it.

But if a representative of the exploited, oppressed class, after this class has overthrown the exploiters, and published and annulled all the secret and annexationist treaties, is subjected to a bandit attack by the imperialists of Germany, can he be condemned for making a "deal" with the Anglo-French robbers, for obtaining arms and potatoes from them in return for money or timber, etc.? Can one find such a deal dishonourable, disgraceful, dirty?

No, one cannot. Every sensible man will understand this and will ridicule as silly fools those who with a "lordly" and learned mien undertake to prove that "the masses will not understand" the difference between the robber war of the imperialist Kerensky (and his dishonourable deals with robbers for a division of jointly stolen spoils) and the Kalyayev deal of the Bolshevik Government with the Anglo-French robbers in order to get arms and potatoes to repel the German robber.

Every sensible man will say: to obtain weapons by purchase from a robber for the purpose of robbery is disgusting and villainous, but to buy weapons from the same robber for the purpose of a just war against an aggressor is something quite legitimate. Only mincing young ladies and affected youths who have 'read books' and derived nothing but affectation from them can see something 'dirty' in it. Apart from people of that category only those who have contracted the itch can fall into such an 'error.' ""²⁸

Similarly, Trotsky stated in 1935 that it was not illegitimate, in itself, for the Stalinist regime in the USSR to try and exploit differences between the imperialist Great Powers and to receive aid from one side. However, dealing with the same example of the Soviet government in 1918 as Lenin did in the quote just cited, Trotsky emphasized that such taking aid must not go hand in hand with political support for such imperialist powers.

"It would be absurd, of course, to deny the Soviet government the right to utilize the antagonism in the camp of the imperialists or, if need be, to make this or that concession to the imperialists. The workers on strike also make use of the competition between capitalist enterprises and make concessions to the capitalists, even capitulate to them, when they are unable to gain victory. But does there follow from this the right of the trade-union leaders to cooperate amicably with the capitalists, to paint them up and to turn into their hirelings? No one will label as traitors the strikers who are forced to surrender: But Jouhaux, who paralyzes the class struggle of the proletariat in the name of peace and amity with the capitalists, we have not only the right but the duty to proclaim as a traitor to the working class. Between the Brest-Litovsk policy of Lenin and the Franco-Soviet

²⁸ V. I. Lenin: The Itch, in: LCW 27, pp. 36-38, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/feb/22.htm>

policy of Stalin, there is the same difference as between the policy of a revolutionary trade unionist, who after a partial defeat is compelled to make concessions to the class enemy, and the policy of the opportunist, who voluntarily becomes of ally an flunkey of the class enemy. Lenin received the reactionary French officer. During those same days, I also received him with the very same object in mind: Lubersac undertook to blow up bridges in the oath of our retreat so that our military supplies would not fall into the hands of Germans. Only some utterly harebrained anarchists will view such a "transaction" as a betrayal. During those same days, the official agents of France paid me visits and offered assistance on a wider scale – artillery and foodstuffs. We very well understood that their aim was to embroil us again in a war with Germany. But the German armies were actually waging an offensive against us, and we were weak. Did we have the right to accept the 'assistance' of the French general staff under these conditions? Unconditionally, yes! I introduced precisely such a motion in the Central Executive Committee of the party in February 22, 1918. The text of this motion has been published in the official minutes of the Central Executive Committee, issued in Moscow in 1929. Here is the motion.

'As the party of the socialist proletariat in power is waging war against Germany, we, through the state organs, take all measures in order best to arm and equip our revolutionary army with all the necessary means and, with this in view, to obtain them wherever possible and, consequently, from capitalist governments as well. While so doing (our) party preserves the complete independence of its foreign policy, does not commit itself politically with any capitalist government and in every given instance takes their proposals under consideration from the standpoint of expediency.'

Lenin was not present at this session of the CEC. He sent a note. Here is its authentic text: 'Please add my vote for accepting potatoes and arms from the brigands of Anglo-French imperialism' (Minutes, p. 246). This is how the then Bolshevik CEC reacted towards the utilization of capitalist antagonism: practical agreements with imperialists ('accept the potatoes') are entirely permissible, but absolutely impermissible is political solidarity with the 'brigands of imperialism!'"²⁹

Trotsky did consider economic and military aid as legitimate, not only in the case of the revolutionary Soviet government and the Stalinist regime, but also in the case of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois-led national liberation movements. In a letter to Australian socialists in 1937, he explained that they should criticize their government for not sufficiently supporting the Chinese national liberation war which was, at that time, led by the reactionary General Chiang Kai-shek.

"We cannot, as stated above, entrust the bourgeoisie with the necessary means for helping China. But our policy would differ in these cases depending on whether Australia intervened in the war on the side of Japan or on the side of China. We would naturally in both cases remain in the sharpest opposition to the government. But at the same time as we boycotted with every means material help to Japan, we would on the contrary accuse the government of not sufficiently supporting China, that is, of betraying her ally, and so on."³⁰

In summary, we re-emphasize that all those leftists who refuse support for the Syrian rebels because of the alleged or real aid they receive from the US or Turkey ignore the lessons of past revolutions, as well as the teachings of the Marxist classics. They use a formally ultra-left position (condemning all those who take aid from imperialists, because it will inevitably corrupt them) in order to justify a thoroughly opportunistic conclusion: desertion of an ongoing, popular revolutionary struggle which is either merely despised by or even actually fought against by the Great Powers.

²⁹ Leon Trotsky: An Open Letter to the Workers of France, in: Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1934-35, pp. 307-309

³⁰ Leon Trotsky: Letter to Australians (1937), in: Trotsky Writings 1937-38, p. 117

Part IV

Imagining Two Different Scenarios: The Revolution Succeeds/Fails in Overthrowing the Assad Regime

By taking a neutral stance in the Syrian Revolution, the abstentionists implicitly maintain that *both* possible outcomes of the civil war are *equally negative* for the interests of the working class and the oppressed in the country, as well as internationally. Thinking about such a supposition should make it clear to anyone that it is completely wrong.

Let's imagine the possible scenarios for the different outcomes. Imagine that the Assad regime wins the civil war and liquidates the popular uprising: The practical outcome will be that most of the refugees will be unable to return to their homes, as the regime will be forced to retain the ethnic cleansing it undertook so that the population hostile to it decreases in numbers. For the same reason, it will have to retain the dictatorship which the Assad clan has already been running for four and a half decades – only, more likely, it will have to *intensify* its repression in light of all the popular hatred that has amassed against it after years of a most brutal genocidal war.

Furthermore, a victory for the Assad regime will have devastating consequences for the entire region. It will chalk up yet another victory for the old ruling class – after the military coup of General al-Sisi in Egypt and the return of the Ben Ali clique in Tunisia. Thus, it will in fact *strengthen* the reactionary regime in Tunis and Cairo. In other words, a victory for Assad will help to stabilize the imperialist order in the region – which is why *all* Great Powers now support the Assad regime, either actively or as the lesser of two evils.

On the other hand, imagine that the Syrian Revolution actually succeeds in overthrowing the regime. Such a victory would not only open the possibility for the war's 11 million refugees to return to their homes. It would also destroy the old state apparatus which has killed so many people. It would destabilize the entire imperialist order in the region. It would create panic not only in Washington, Brussels and Moscow but also in Tel Aviv. Let's not forget: the Syrian regime always served as a stabilizing factor for the imperialist order in the region. It has not fired a single bullet against Israeli territory since 1973. Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976, and fought against Palestinian militias. In 1991, Assad the father supported the US war against Iraq and even sent 14,500 troops to participate in the imperialist aggression. A victory of the popular uprising would have an electrifying effect for the workers and oppressed throughout the whole region!

The abstentionists might retort that, given the absence of a revolutionary party, it is possible that Syrian might deteriorate into another Libya, i.e., a country ridden by chaos and civil war and various Islamist movements. To this we reply that, indeed, such a development cannot be dismissed.

However, first Marxists develop a tactic in order to *advance* the current possibilities of the liberation struggle and to *increase* the influence of revolutionaries. To succeed in this, they must take they side of the struggle of the oppressed and not stand on the sidelines. If they would join the camp of abstentionism, they would curtail if not entirely eliminate their ability to link up with the tens of thousands of fighters who are waging an armed struggle for the victory of the Syrian Revolution. So

even if a victory of the revolution were to end in a Libya-like scenario, revolutionaries would be in a better position to build a party in the future, as they could relate to a heritage of honor, not one of abstentionist betrayal.

Secondly, all the panic-mongers tearing out their hair over the fall of the Gaddafi dictatorship only repeat the reactionary nonsense spread by the Putin and Trump supporters and their reformist lackeys. Libya under Gaddafi served the Great Powers as a reliable oil-exporter. Libya under Gaddafi served the imperialist EU as a reliable guardian against African migrants. All this is gone, for now; should revolutionaries mourn this?!

Instead of retaining a reliable local guardian, the Great Powers have suffered various setbacks in Libya. The US got their ambassador killed by Islamists in 2012 and all Great Powers were forced to close their embassies there. Furthermore, there are still 150,000-200,000 persons in Libya under arms. It is ironically amusing that there are still many Stalinists and Castro-Chavistas who maintain that the outcome of the Libyan Revolution was a victory for NATO imperialism and a setback for the revolutionary struggle!

Naturally, revolutionaries cannot ignore all the setbacks and challenges in Libya. The eastern part of the country is under control of General Haftar – an utterly reactionary local Bonaparte who first served in Gaddafi's repressive apparatus and later worked for the CIA. He is currently trying to conquer the entire country in the service of the Great Powers. Other parts of the country are under control of Islamist militias. In other words, the unfinished democratic revolution of 2011 resulted not in the working class and the oppressed taking power, but neither could the ruling class stabilize the political situation and create a strong state apparatus.³¹ Therefore, the country remains unstable in the extreme with an ongoing civil war.

As Marxists, we are all too aware that the liberation struggle in Libya is impeded by the lack of a revolutionary party. It is precisely for this reason that, after the fall of the Gaddafi dictatorship, the country is characterized by civil war, the spread of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois Islamist forces and simple banditry. However, a revolutionary has to ask him or herself: would a stable dictatorship which arrests, tortures and kills every opponent improve the conditions for revolutionaries to build a party?! Which conditions are more favorable for the class struggle: stable dictatorships and regional control by the Great Powers or instability, collapsing regimes and a weakened grip by the Great Powers? Authentic revolutionaries should know the answer. No, more than five years after the downfall of Gaddafi, revolutionaries have no reason to wish his tyranny back!

A Period of Defeats and Retreats: What Are the Reasons?

³¹ See, e.g., RCIT: Stop the US Bombing of Libya! Mobilize against the Expansion of the Imperialist War! Defeat the Imperialist Aggressors and Their Lackeys in Libya! 23.2.2016, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/us-bombing-libya/>; RCIT: General Sisi, Hollande, Obama: Hands Off Libya! Defeat General Haftars' Imperialist Lackeys! Down with the Daash-Gang of Killers! For a Workers' and Popular Government! 26.2.2015, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/hands-off-libya/>

Let's finally elaborate some thoughts on the future prospects of the Arab Revolution. As we have already stated, we reject the assertion of those who claim that the Arab Revolution is dead and buried, that a "counter-revolutionary period" has begun instead, and that revolutionaries should no longer support the struggle of the freedom fighters. However, as early 2013 we acknowledged that the Arab Revolution has entered a period of setbacks and retreats. In fact, this development does not come as a surprise to Marxists. The RCIT has repeatedly warned about the dangers and limitations of the Arab Revolution. On the second anniversary of the Syrian Revolution, in March 2013, we wrote:

*"The ability of the Bashar al-Assad regime to survive so far is largely due to the lack of working class independent mobilization at the head of the opposition. There are many local committees that could become Soviets and which are continuing to provide services. But they lack coordination and a revolutionary strategy. Equally, the resistance is still made up of countless formations of loosely connected armed militants, with no credible unified revolutionary command. The fractured character of this armed resistance is a result not only of the social segmentation and isolation policies enforced for decades by Damascus but also because of the class nature of the opposition at the moment. The opposition's failure to mobilize the masses against the regime has given El Assad a breathing space. The extent to which the opposition is fragmented we can learn from the number of groups that act within the opposition: (...) The middle class leaders of the uprising are blaming each other for the failure. The seculars blame the Islamists while the Islamists are blaming the secularists. The simple truth is that the middle class organizations – whether they are secularists or Islamists – do not have the program, strategy or tactics to mobilize the masses workers and peasants to overthrow the bloody regime. If the leaders of the opposition hate Assad they are at the same time afraid of working class revolution. If there is a clear lesson to learn it is that without the working class, women and men leading the masses including the lower middle class and without a revolutionary leadership of the working class the stalemate can continue for a longer period."*³²

And in a comprehensive document on the state and perspectives of the Arab Revolution which we adopted in May 2015 we stated:

"While the workers and poor succeeded in some countries – at least temporary – to bring down the old dictatorships and achieving certain democratic rights, nowhere did they succeed in completing the democratic revolution, let alone to get rid of poverty and super-exploitation by the imperialist monopolies and Great Powers. This would only have been possible by making the revolution permanent, as Leon Trotsky – co-leader of the October Revolution together with V.I. Lenin – already explained nearly a century ago. Such a permanent revolution must bear the character of a successful social revolution – combining the struggle for democratic rights with the expropriation of the imperialist monopolies and the domestic bourgeoisie and the destruction of the old, capitalist state apparatus. Hence, it must open the road to the creation of workers' and fallahin republics and the formation of a socialist federation of Maghreb and Mashreq.

Instead, the spontaneous popular uprisings of the Arab Revolution were soon hijacked by various types of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships. Some fostered the illusion that mass struggles can be victorious via peaceful mobilizations and organizing via social networks. Others propagated the orientation to parliamentary democracy and liberalism. Another trend was the orientation towards a combination of bourgeois democracy and a religious agenda (al-Ikhwan, Ennahda). What all these trends had in common was:

i. The refusal to smash the old state apparatus – usually dominated by the bureaucracy of the repression forces and closely aligned with the big domestic capitalists, as well as the imperialist powers.

³² Yossi Schwartz: Victory to the Revolution in Syria! The second anniversary of the uprising in Syria, 15.3.2013, <https://www.thecommunists.net/worldwide/africa-and-middle-east/victory-to-syrian-revolution/>

ii. *The acceptance of the ownership of the key sectors of the economy by private corporations.*

The domination of the popular democratic movements by such bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces ensured that they would fail to carry forward the revolutionary process. As a result, the initial revolutionary advances of the workers and poor – leading to the overthrow of Ben Ali, Mubarak, Gaddafi, and Saleh in 2011 – were derailed. In several cases they were contained by new bourgeois regimes. These regimes, while being forced to permit more democratic rights – reflecting the strength of the fighting people – prepared new attacks on the workers and poor on behalf of imperialism (Libya after Gaddafi, Morsi in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, al-Hadi in Yemen). In Bahrain the popular uprising was smashed by the Saudi kingdom on behalf of imperialism in March 2011.”³³

Today, more than six years after the beginning of the Arab Revolution, we can summarize the reasons for its defeats and setbacks as follows. First, the uprising of the workers and peasants met a determined campaign of annihilation waged by much stronger enemies: the traditional ruling classes in the region which possess an oversized repressive apparatus, trained for decades, which was not successfully smashed in the first attempt. In addition, the Arab Revolution faces the opposition of literally *all* imperialist Great Powers – in particular the US, Russia, the EU and China. They all support the reactionary dictatorships like that of General al-Sisi in Egypt and the Gulf monarchies. And, in the case of Assad, Washington has already reconciled itself with his staying in power as the only realistic option to “restore law and order” in Syria. Today there is a looming Great Power conspiracy – in cooperation with regional powers like Iran and Turkey – against the Syrian Revolution, as we see a combined and coordinated attempt by the US administration, Putin, Assad, Erdoğan, the Teheran regime and others to pacify the revolutionary process by a combination of buying off one sector of the rebels' leadership and by annihilating the uncompromising sector of the rebels.

Furthermore, the Assad regime enjoys massive military and financial support. It can only continue the war because of assistance from Russian imperialism, the Iranian regime and Hezbollah. In fact, it can only survive because of this huge intervention. Iran officially announced in late November, 2016 that more than 1,000 of its soldiers have already died in Syria.³⁴ From this, one can conclude that there must be tens of thousands of soldiers fighting in Iranian militias in Syria. Iranian sources themselves have admitted that 20,000 Shia fighters alone from Afghanistan are engaged in Syria on behalf of Assad.³⁵ The fact is that regular Syrian soldiers constitute only a minority of Assad's forces, and they are extremely demoralized. According to Mikhail Khodarenok, a retired Russian general, it is the foreign troops and private militias who are doing most of the fighting, while Assad's official army mans checkpoints to extort bribes from the population. The general comments on *Gazeta.ru*: “*It would be easier to disband the Syrian army and recruit a new one.*”³⁶

Second, the workers and oppressed started a revolutionary process but lacked a leadership which could drive the struggle forward to victory. The petty-bourgeois liberal forces remained isolated from

³³ RCIT: Revolution and Counterrevolution in the Arab World: An Acid Test for Revolutionaries (Theses 3-5), 31 May 2015, <https://www.thecommunists.net/theory/theses-arab-revolution/chapter1/>

³⁴ Iran: More than 1,000 soldiers die in Syria since 2011, 22 November 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/iran-1000-soldiers-die-syria-2011-161122132955852.html>

³⁵ Hashmatallah Moslih: Iran 'foreign legion' leans on Afghan Shia in Syria war, 22 Jan 2016 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/iran-foreign-legion-leans-afghan-shia-syria-war-160122130355206.html> ; also see on this, Nationality of Pro-Assad Militias, <https://www.facebook.com/SyriaSolidarityCampaign/photos/a.234961560180369.1073741828.227661070910418/405211046488752/?type=3&theater>

³⁶ Ruslan Leviev: Here's why Assad's army can't win the war in Syria, 09.09.2016, <https://citeam.org/here-s-why-assad-s-army-can-t-win-the-war-in-syria/>

the downtrodden masses and soon sought to become servants of the imperialist powers and assume the guise of slightly “reformed” versions of the old ruling class (like the old Ben Ali clique in Tunisia led by the current President Beji Caid el-Sebsi). Bourgeois Islamists, like *Ennahda* in Tunisia or Morsi’s *al-Ikhwan* in Egypt, also saved the rule of the capitalist class in the midst of the Arab Revolution by demobilizing the popular masses. And the petty-bourgeois populist Islamists usually led the popular struggles into a sectarian and guerrilla-elitist dead-end (e.g., *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* in Syria).

And, third, the international workers’ movement has completely failed to deliver any meaningful support to the revolutionary masses in Syria. Most social democratic, Stalinist or centrist organizations either openly or covertly sympathize with the counterrevolution, or they take a neutral position towards this ongoing revolution. Characteristic of this is the call by a significant sector of the centrists for weapons for Rojava, i.e., the YPG-led Kurdish struggle. But they never called for weapons for the Syrian rebels! Ironically, it is the YPG which is the main collaborator for US (and Russian) imperialism, and not the Syrian rebels!

Some Thoughts on the Future Prospects of the Arab Revolution

The Arab Revolution is in a process of retreat, but it has not been completely defeated. The revolutionary process is not over, as the Syrian workers and oppressed are continuing their struggle against the dictatorship, as the Yemeni people continue to resist the Saudi invaders, as in Libya the ruling class has still not been able to disarm the militias and end the civil war.

Lenin once said that revolutionaries are those who leave the barricade as late and not as early as possible, so as to give as little credence as possible to its inevitable defeat. *"But a Marxist, while utilising every field, even a reactionary one, for the fight for the revolution, does not stoop to glorifying reaction, does not forget to fight for the best possible field of activity. Therefore, the Marxist is the first to foresee the approach of a revolutionary period, and already begins to rouse the people and to sound the tocsin while the philistines are still wrapt in the slavish slumber of loyal subjects. The Marxist is therefore the first to take the path of direct revolutionary struggle, marching straight to battle and exposing the illusions of conciliation cherished by all kinds of social and political vacillators. Therefore, the Marxist is the last to leave the path of directly revolutionary struggle, he leaves it only when all possibilities have been exhausted, when there is not a shadow of hope for a shorter way, when the basis for an appeal to prepare for mass strikes, an uprising, etc., is obviously disappearing. Therefore, a Marxist treats with contempt the innumerable renegades of the revolution who shout to him: We are more “progressive” than you, we were the first to renounce the revolution! We were the first to “submit” to the monarchist constitution!"*³⁷

However, as we have said above, our revolutionary determination does not lead us to the opposite but equally wrong conclusion, i.e., denying the huge setbacks and dangers for the Arab Revolution in general and the Syrian Revolution in particular. In fact, the danger of a counter-revolutionary settlement in Syria – under the instructions of Washington and Moscow – has not decreased since we published our warning. Currently, the main obstacles for such a counter-revolutionary solution are (i)

³⁷ V.I.Lenin: The Crisis of Menshevism (1906), in: LCW Vol.11, p. 351

the ongoing determination of the Syrian people and their militias to continue the war of liberation against the tyrant; (ii) the fact that the Trump Administration is confused and lacks a clear strategy for the region; and (iii) the current focus of the Great Powers on defeating Daesh before they deal with the rebels.

However, it would be naïve to imagine that these conditions could not change in the next period. Quite the contrary, such changes are even likely. It is already a miracle that the Syrian people were able to hold out for so long. It would not be surprising if larger and larger sectors of the workers and oppressed become exhausted and are ready to accept any "solution." Sooner or later the Great Powers will probably conquer the territories which are currently controlled by Daesh. And then, they might intensify their efforts to bring the revolutionary process to an end. The imperialists are already bribing the leaderships of various militias in order to betray the Syrian Revolution and to attack the most determined elements of the resistance. The Arab newspaper *Al Hayat* recently reported that the US has already won the agreement of a number of such militias totaling some 30,000 fighters to attack the *Tahrir al-Sham* forces in the province of Idlib.³⁸ Such a stab in the back would be a terrible and demoralizing betrayal, and could have devastating effects on the Syrian Revolution. In such a situation, revolutionaries would have to defend the *Tahrir al-Sham* forces against the traitors.

In the end, the lack of a strong revolutionary party means that the leadership remains in the hand of petty-bourgeois forces which either aspire to take a place at the top of the bourgeois state apparatus (and hence are always looking for a compromise with the ruling class and imperialism), or which follow a religious sectarian agenda that is guaranteed to repel large sectors of the working class and the oppressed, and which strives to create a regime which would subjugate the popular masses to the rule of a small military and theocratic elite.

Does this mean that the Syrian Revolution – or even the entire revolutionary process in the Arab world – will soon come to an end? Such a negative turn in the political situation cannot be dismissed. But neither is such a development inevitable. In fact, the process of civil war, revolutionary struggle, rivalry between great and regional powers, etc. is so complex, that it would be politically disastrous from a Marxist point of view to draw any premature conclusions.

First and foremost, the Syrian people have proven their heroic steadfastness during more than six years of revolutionary resistance against an enemy far superior to it militarily, backed by Russia – the world's second largest Great Power (in military terms). There is no political law that dictates that such steadfastness will inevitably end now.

Second, there are numerous factors which can provoke new dynamics in the regional equilibrium. One of them is the outbreak of new popular insurrections. We already saw some important protests in Morocco at the end of 2016. Algeria with its half-dead president Bouteflika is another important country where such an insurrection could take place. And then, let us not forget, that a new Intifada in Palestine has been looming for some time. Furthermore, the political situation among all regional

³⁸ "Acc. to .@alhayatdaily, 30,000+ vetted rebels have agreed to direct joint attacks on HTS in N Syria in return for a full resumption of outside backing (wages that were stopped after Trump took office; weapons, including TOWs). Ahrar is being urged by the US to join in. The report also claims a new Raqqa Op will start after the Turkish referendum with the YPG-held Tel Abyad as an opening point." (<http://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2017/1-april-acc-to-alhayatdaily-30000-vetted-rebels-have-agreed>)

powers – Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia – is highly unstable and could be transformed into a domestic crisis.

Third, an intensification of the imperialist aggression in the Middle East – which is currently taking place in Syria and Iraq – could trigger renewed mass protests. This would particularly be so if it leads to a significant deployment of troops on the ground or the military attack against another country. Here we have in mind, for example, an imperialist invasion in Libya – there are already smaller contingents of US, French, British and Russian troops on the ground. Another possibility is a new Israeli war against the Palestinian people in Gaza.

Fourth, these developments could be accelerated by the inevitable intensification of the rivalry between the Great Powers – first and foremost the US and Russia, as well as between the regional powers. Such an acceleration of the rivalry will inevitably influence domestic conflicts and struggles as it weakens each regime and encourages all oppressed people and oppositional forces to intensify their insurrectional activities.

In summary: the Arab world remains a highly fertile ground for wars and revolutions!

The Urgent Need for a Revolutionary Party

The crucial factor which will finally decide if the Arab Revolution will be crushed or not is the question whether the politically most advanced working class activists will learn the lessons of the revolutionary struggle and succeed in building a revolutionary party in time.

As long as the working class and the oppressed do not possess a revolutionary combat party – nationally as well as worldwide – they *cannot succeed* in their struggle for liberation. In order to succeed against its powerful enemies, the working class must have a party with a clear program – outlining the way from the present situation to the conquest of power. It needs a party which concretizes such a program in a series of strategies and tactics related to the changing conditions of the class struggle. And it must have a party which accompanies such a program with a combat organization of steeled cadres which act in a centralized, coordinated fashion as a single clenched fist for the proletarian class struggle.³⁹

Such a party has to be based on a revolutionary program focused on the present situation. All those who want to support the Syrian Revolution – in Syria as well as internationally – should unite today on basis of several fundamental principles without which it is impossible to find a correct orientation.

³⁹ See on this e.g. RCIT: Urgent Call for Unity and a Joint Struggle on a Revolutionary Platform. An Open Letter to All Authentic Revolutionaries for an International Conference on the 100th Anniversary of the October Revolution to Advance the Building of a Revolutionary World Party, 09.01.2017, <https://www.thecommunists.net/rcit/urgent-call-revolutionary-unity-1/>; RCIT: *Manifesto for Revolutionary Liberation. The Tasks of the Liberation Struggle against Decaying Capitalism (adopted by the 1st Congress of the RCIT in October 2016,* <https://www.thecommunists.net/rcit-program-2016/>); Michael Pröbsting: *Building the Revolutionary Party in Theory and Practice. Looking Back and Ahead after 25 Years of Organized Struggle for Bolshevism* (2014), <http://www.thecommunists.net/theory/rcit-party-building/>

- * *Smash the Assad tyranny! Victory to the Syrian Revolution! Continue the support for the popular struggle against the dictatorship!*
- * *No trust in and no collaboration with any imperialist Great Power (like Russia, US, EU, China) nor with the governments of any of the regional powers (like Iran, Turkey, Saudi-Arabia)! Fight against all imperialist interventions!*
- * *Down with all dictatorships and reactionary regimes in the Middle East! Solidarity with the popular resistance fighting for freedom!*
- * *No to sectarianism! We want a society which respects the opinion of everyone on religion as his or her personal issue!*
- * *Down with the counter-revolutionary Daesh!*
- * *For multi-religious and multi-national unity in the struggle against the Assad dictatorship! For full national self-determination for all national and ethnic minorities!*
- * *No trust in the official rebel leaderships – neither the pro-Western FSA nor the various types of Islamists! However, despite our sharp criticism of these leaderships, we unconditionally support the ongoing struggle against the Assad regime led by these forces!*
- * *For the formation of popular councils and popular militias!*
- * *For a Workers' and Peasant Republic in Syria! Spread the revolution to the entire Arab world and the Middle East!*
- * *The international workers movement must rally to support the Syrian Revolution! For a workers' aid campaign for the Syrian people – as was done in solidarity with the Bosnian people in 1992-95!*
- * *The international workers' movement must organize a campaign to boycott the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his capitalist business cronies! For workers' actions against the imperialist forces attacking the Syrian people!*
- * *Open the borders for the Syrian refugees! Down with racism and Islamophobia in Europe!*
- * *Most of all: For the building of a revolutionary party in Syria as part of a new revolutionary International!*

However, a revolutionary party cannot be built in national isolation. Each country depends on others and each national class struggle is determined by international factors. This is particularly true in the case of Syria and the entire Arab world. There is no *national* road to build a world party, but only an *international* one. Hence, a true revolutionary party, as well as pre-party organization, must exist as an *international formation from the beginning*. Without an international organization, national centeredness and finally nationalist deviations are unavoidable – as there is no consciousness without matter and no spirit without a body.

For this, activists must break with all those political currents which have led the Arab Revolution into the present cul-de-sacs. They must build a revolutionary party *independent* of all variations of Stalinism, Arab (or Kurdish) nationalism, Islamism or bourgeois liberalism. At the same time, it can not and must not be built outside of the concrete mass struggle which is currently taking place under the leadership of such forces. Hence, revolutionaries have to apply the United Front tactic based on the principle: "*March separately, strike together*". As the RCIT stated in its *Urgent Call*: "*Revolutionaries oppose all forms of sectarianism which refuses participation in mass struggles under the pretext of their non-revolutionary leaderships. Instead they apply the united front tactic in the struggles of the workers and peasants led by reformist or populist forces against austerity program (e.g., trade unions, mass organizations of the peasants and the urban poor, but also political parties like MORENA in Mexico, SYRIZA in Greece before 2015, PODEMOS in Spain) or against anti-democratic coups and dictatorships (PT, CUT, MST in Brazil; Islamists in Egypt; rebels in Syria). Such an orientation must be combined with a consistent struggle against all forms of popular-frontism and petty-bourgeois populism, and for the breaking of workers and peasants away*

from these non-revolutionary leaderships and to advance the formation of an independent and revolutionary Workers' Party."

True, a new a revolutionary party in Syria as well as a revolutionary world party cannot be established in a single stroke. It must be politically tested in the struggles of the workers and oppressed. However, the *organizing of a nucleus* – irrespective of its current size – to build such a party *can and must* start immediately. Hence we repeat our call to all authentic revolutionaries to *immediately start coming together* and discuss a concrete platform for the class struggle and for advancing the building of a party.